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The First Wave of Decolonization

Edited by Mark Thurner

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45. In the case of Cuba, it is instructive that the episode typically cited as the inaugural moment of the anticolonial struggle, the Grito de Yara (1868), involved a slaveholding sugar planter, Carlos Manuel de Céspedes, not only declaring war on the Spaniards but liberating his slaves in the process. Whether it was the shadow of Haiti, or the many slave uprisings and conspiracies in Cuba itself, or sheer military necessity, Céspedes clearly deemed the retention of chattel slavery and the fight against Spanish rule as incompatible projects. See Ada Ferrer, *Insurgent Cuba: Race, Nation, and Revolution, 1868–1898* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999), 21.

7 The Lost Italian Connection

Federica Morelli

The Hispanic American and Italian independence movements were intimately connected. Both sought to excise Spanish rule in the territories they sought to liberate and unite. The foundational, transoceanic connections of the 1820s that linked the two were, however, lost to view when a longstanding, anti-Hispanic sentiment was rekindled by late-nineteenth-century Italian nationalists. Like many other European nationalists of the period, the Italians came to view Latin America as unfit for independent nationhood. Political instability in the decades following independence from Spain fuelled a narrative of failure in Europe. Italian historiography finished the job, erasing most of the traces of the early connection. Although a new historiography has begun to recover the complexity of those lost connections, the enduring tendency to view independence and decolonization in teleological, national terms continues to hinder understanding of the transatlantic reach of 'the first wave of decolonization.'

The Constitution of Cadiz and Federalism in Hispanic America and Italy

In the first Risorgimento, Italian interest in Spanish America was particularly strong. Indeed, the Hispanic American experience, and in particular the Constitution of Cadiz, was initially perceived as a model to learn from. At that time, the concept of independence for Italians did not necessarily imply that the nation must free itself from an imperial power. Instead, the concept was associated with political and cultural 'regeneration,' as the same term *Risorgimento* suggests, and this concept could be accommodated under a federalist model. Although federal constitutions were debated earlier in the United States and France, in the Hispanic and Italian case the key precedent or model was not Philadelphia or Paris but Cadiz. This constitution was sworn into law across Spanish America, the Caribbean, and the Philippines (which all thereby became 'Ultramarine Spain'). It reemerged again in the writing of independent constitutions for the new republics of South America in the 1820s. In Italy, the Cadiz Constitution circulated widely soon after its declaration in 1812 and it

became the banner of revolutionaries in Naples and Turin in 1820 and 1821. Its checks on monarchical power, the broad definition of citizenship and nation, and its defence of Catholic religion and ancient institutions, all ensured its enthusiastic reception in Italy.

The Cadiz Constitution briefly established a transoceanic 'Spanish nation' of citizens consisting of all the adult males of the Empire with, after much debate and American opposition, the exception of those of African descent. This radical substitution of 'the Spanish Nation' for the 'Hispanic Monarchy' did not imply a new order of the territory, which continued to be constituted of the chartered territorial subjects inherited from the Bourbon regime of the eighteenth century (*audiencias*, provinces, intendencies, municipalities, parishes). The Cadiz idea of an imperial nationhood under a constitutional monarch and that maintained territorial integrity and internal political structure fitted well with the one that many Italian patriots shared in the 1820s.

Many Italian patriots shared with Hispanic Americans a federalist reading and application of the Cadiz Constitution. For instance, Luigi Angeloni supported a 'confederation of republics' along the same lines advanced by Americans during and after independence from Spain.¹ The federalist interpretation began during the constitutional debates in Cadiz of 1810-1812,² when Hispanic American delegates opposed the more centralist vision of the Peninsular delegates.³ Two essential features of the Cadiz constitution left open federalist opportunities for successor regimes.⁴ First, the vague limits of the territorial spaces of each 'republic' or jurisdiction. In America, this uncertainty produced instability and allowed for the confederation of administrative units.⁵ Second, the Cadiz Constitution granted to local institutions considerable powers, contributing to the dramatic fragmentation of jurisdictions.⁶

The strong autonomy of local institutions established in Cadiz drew the attention of Italian patriots, especially of Piedmontese and Neapolitans who, in 1820, created liberal regimes inspired by the same constitution.⁷ They considered the Cadiz Constitution the best instrument to overcome the administrative centralization imposed by Napoleon and then by the absolutist restoration. It would return to the provinces and municipalities the room for political manoeuvre that they had lost. The resentment against the French model that had dispossessed the municipalities of their traditional powers constituted one of the main causes of the Neapolitan rebellion in 1820.⁸

Echoing the American readings of the Cadiz Constitution, Bartolomeo Fiorilli, a Neapolitan exile in Spain, underlined the need for local autonomy in Italy, noting that 'sovereignty lies essentially in the towns [pueblos] and not in the nation.'⁹ As the historiography on the Spanish American independence has clearly demonstrated, this antinomy between 'nation' (which in the 'Spanish Monarchy' was transoceanic) and the 'towns' (*pueblos*), persisted in the constitutional debates in some parts of Latin America into the middle decades of the nineteenth century.¹⁰

Italian-American Connections in the 1820s

The 1820s represented a period of setbacks for the Italian regeneration. The failure of the 1820-1821 'revolutions' in Turin, Milan, and Naples marked the end of a generation's dreams of introducing a Cadiz-inspired, liberal federation among the Italian states. Amid failure and indeed the collapse of the revolution at home, international events became once again the source of inspiration and theme of discussions among Italian intellectuals. The failed revolutions of the 1820s had been led by former Napoleonic civil servants and army officers apparently nostalgic for the achievements of Bonaparte, or by backward-looking aristocrats anxious to regain their pre-revolutionary stations.¹¹ In short, federalism during the Restoration has been dismissed as the preferred option of the Italian oligarchy, who wished to maintain their regional power bases and thus were hostile to any idea of united nationhood based on popular sovereignty.¹² These views are linked to the idea that Risorgimento federalism was fundamentally anti-democratic in nature, an interpretation which seems to be confirmed by Filippo Buonarroti and Giuseppe Mazzini, who, like Bolivar, saw unity as the only means to defeat the aristocracy. New research on the reception of the Cadiz Constitution, however, suggests that the appeal of federalism was not nostalgic or backward-looking, but instead rather more democratic and international than previously thought.

In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, the contested meanings of the terms 'independence' and 'nation' were very much in flux on both sides of the Atlantic. The Junta of Quito declared in 1811 that it was 'absolutely free from the dependence, vassalage, and power of any foreign government, and subordinated only to the supreme and legitimate authority of our King Ferdinand VII.'¹³ Here, independence glossed the desire not to be dependent on any foreign government while affirming allegiance to a distant monarch forced into French exile. The US Declaration of Independence reflects a similar notion of independence, being not only a declaration of freedom from all foreign powers but a recognition of interdependence. As David Armitage has demonstrated, 'independence' at this moment reflected the concept of the liberty of a state or political community to act freely with respect to other states or external authorities, including the ability to make agreements to limit voluntarily its own liberty.¹⁴ Behind this concept of liberty was the notion of 'the Law of Nations' elaborated by the Swiss jurist Emer de Vattel, whose book *Le Droit de Gens* (1758) circulated widely both in Europe and America. Vattel compared political communities or states to free individuals living in a state of nature. Since men were originally free and independent, so too were the political communities they created by consent; 'the law of nations,' he wrote 'is nothing but the natural law applied to nations.' Thus, the guerrilla and mercenary war fought against Bonaparte's forces in the Iberian Peninsula

independence' although of course Spain was never a French colony, even under Bourbon rule. Instead, Bonaparte was a foreign tyrant and 'Anti-Christ' whose removal would restore a previous 'Spanish liberty.'

During the first three decades of the nineteenth century in Hispanic America, political communities on several levels could and did define themselves as 'independent' even if they formed part of greater associations such as monarchies, viceroalties, or confederations. The political crisis of the monarchy produced a fragmentation of sovereignty, such that in the short run colonial administrative units did not necessarily become unified, national territories, as Anderson assumed.¹⁵ More basic units, often called *provincias*, *pueblos*, and *repúblicas*, represented by various kinds of *cabildos*, or councils, exercised de facto, often highly democratic forms of citizenship and independence well into the nineteenth century. In turn, these provinces and pueblos could unite to form larger, regional units in moments of crisis and civil war, increasingly frequent in the post-independence decades. In Mexico, Central and South America, inter-provincial and inter-state confederations were formed and reformed, consolidated or disbanded.¹⁶ Some hardened into national states; others did not. The shifting borders of Latin American states and provinces during this period reflected the dynamics of local sovereignties born, in part, of a Cadiz-inspired, federalist independence, and in part in response to increasing militarization and the need for local defence.

Although Italian historians have more recently restored the importance of the early years of federalism in Italy, the tendency is still to underplay the international political dimension.¹⁷ Concepts of Italian 'resurgence' elaborated in the 1820s rarely presupposed a unified Italian nation-state covering the entire peninsula. Santangelo, who promoted the 1821 revolution in Naples and then joined the liberals in Spain and in Spanish America, claimed that in Italy there were not one, but many nations.¹⁸ Like their Hispanic American counterparts, many Italian intellectuals of the period supported federalism as the most appropriate model to grant individual and collective rights as well as to defend political communities against external threats. Finally, they would advocate for an inclusive, federal nation based on political commitment rather than on linguistic or cultural differences. These Cadiz- and Hispanic American-inspired characteristics of the first Risorgimento were, however, progressively treated as expressions of backwardness and romanticism. The Italian historiography also focused on the presence of Italian heroes—above all Garibaldi—in the Americas rather than on the influence of Cadiz and Latin America on Italian political culture.¹⁹

An important exception is the work of Lucy Riall. Riall has documented the importance of Garibaldi's experiences in South America for his own personal and political evolution, freeing it from the mythologized prison to which it had been assigned by Italian romanticism. Garibaldi's political ideas, most notably his lasting belief in the virtue of dictatorship

in time of war, derived from his observations on politics and the conduct of war in South America. Many of the battles over the political forms of nation-building and the struggles between conservatives and liberals which Garibaldi was to become involved in on his return to Italy, he first encountered in republican circles in Montevideo. Finally, it was in Rio Grande and Uruguay that Garibaldi learned to fight.²⁰ Another important exception to the rule is Maurizio Isabella's work on political activists who left Italy after the collapse of the Napoleonic regimes in 1814 and the suppression of liberal political movements in 1820–1821. Isabella has shown that the cross-cultural exchanges and writings of these critical-minded intellectuals contributed decisively to Italian Risorgimento nationalism.²¹

During this early period of the 'First Risorgimento,' hundreds of Italians left the peninsula to join foreign uprisings or fight wars of independence in southern Europe (Spain and Greece) and in America, giving rise to a global movement of solidarity that benefited the Latin American cause of independence. It was in this context of displacement and solidarity that Latin America became newly relevant to the Italian Risorgimento. Together with hundreds of British and Irish fighters, large numbers of Italian volunteers, many of whom were former Napoleonic soldiers or officers, joined the independence campaigns of patriotic forces in South America and Mexico.²² Among the most famous of these was the Piedmontese Carlo Castelli, who joined Bolívar in Haiti in 1816 and was promoted to General in 1830.²³

Another notable Piedmontese volunteer was Giuseppe Avezzana. Avezzana joined Colonel Riego in Spain, sailed to Louisiana, and from there to Mexico, where he defended Tampico against Spanish aggression in 1829. Later he fought in the Mexican Civil War supporting Santa Ana against Bustamante. He returned to Genoa amidst the risings of 1848 and soon became one of the most important officers of the urban insurrection of 1849. Another important ex-Napoleonic officer in Bolívar's forces was Agostino Codazzi. After the defeat of Napoleon in 1815, Codazzi joined other ex-soldiers drifting around Europe and the Near East in search of employment, eventually undertaking commercial ventures in the Ottoman Empire. In 1817, he sailed to Baltimore with his friend Costante Ferrari. They travelled to Texas, Mexico, Central America, and the Caribbean, finally arriving in New Granada where they joined Bolívar's camp. After the war, Codazzi became an important political figure in Venezuela and Colombia. He made the first detailed topographic maps of both countries, guiding the work of the Colombian Corographic Commission.²⁴

The intellectual connections between the Italian diaspora and Latin America were further enhanced by the circulation of printed material. Despite official censorship, echoes of the events in Latin America reached the Italian peninsula through the press. In some cases, Italian journalism

reported on the political and economic conditions of Latin America, often with information gleaned from the French press. The Milanese review, *Annali Universali di Statistica*, is a case point.²⁵ Its editorial staff consisted of former Napoleonic civil servants who did not hide their sympathies for the new republics. Italian intellectuals not only were informed about the events taking place on the other side of the Atlantic; they also followed debates among Hispanic American patriots, and in some cases participated in those debates. In turn, many of the Italian exiles wrote about Latin American events in Europe, whether from direct experience in America or thanks to documents they received from their overseas contacts.

Such intellectual exchanges frequently took place outside Italy in the metropolitan centres of Paris, London, and Brussels. Italian exiles in England, France, and Belgium had direct contacts with Hispanic American diplomatic representatives of the new republics in Europe, such as Emmanuel de Gorostiza, Vicente Rocafuerte, and José Mariano Michelena. Disputes between federalists and centralists reverberated in the Spanish émigré journals in London and in the publications of prominent Hispanic American liberals in Europe such as Vicente Rocafuerte, author, with the editorial support of the Spanish exile José Canga Argüelles, of a passionate defence of American federalism against Bolívar's centralizing constitution of 1826.²⁶ Italian exiles followed these debates.²⁷ The circulation of ideas among Italians and Americans was further encouraged by epistolary exchanges, such as that between Giuseppe Pecchio, exiled in Spain, and José Cecilio del Valle.²⁸

Other Italian intellectuals made their way to the Americas. The Neapolitan Pietro de Angelis settled in Buenos Aires in 1827, where he became a supporter of Juan Manuel de Rosas, President of the United Provinces of Río de la Plata. Claudio Linati, Orazio Santangelo, and Fiorenzo Galli, for instance, moved to Mexico and became directly involved in the clash between *Yorkinos* and *Escoceses* lodges before returning to Europe.²⁹ Siding with the radical faction of Yorkinos in the pages of *El Iris* or in later articles and publications, the Italians supported the view that sovereignty resided in the people and that federalism could consolidate the nation and defend individual rights. Among the Yorkinos, Lorenzo de Zavala was the Mexican politician most closely connected with the Italian exiles. Through Zavala, Santangelo and the other exiles met other radical politicians.³⁰ Another Italian, Giacomo Costantino Beltrami, travelled extensively in Mexico in 1824 and 1825. His *Le Mexique*³¹ positively compared the Mexican federalist model to the Achaean League.³² Orazio Santangelo was another Italian federalist deeply involved in Mexican political debates.³³

The writings of these exiled Italian federalists in America and Europe generally celebrated the liberal nature and federal constitutions of the 'independent, industrial, and commercial republics' of the Americas,

deeming them to be the only ones compatible with the spirit of modern civilization. They therefore advocated an American-inspired federalism for a future independent Italy.³⁴ Following the post-independence debates and experiences of the Hispanic American republics, they came to support the view that sovereignty lay in the people, and that federalism alone could defend both individual and collective rights.

The example of the new Hispanic American republics encouraged among Italian observers a notion of nationhood that was based not on race or ethnicity, but on granting citizenship to almost the entire adult male population. This Cadiz-inspired model of an inclusive nation is strikingly illustrated by Claudio Linati in his famous collection of engravings describing the new Mexican state, published in Brussels in 1828. Linati was an ex-officer of the Napoleonic army who, after having participated in various liberal movements in Italy and Spain, was exiled to Mexico in 1825, where he obtained citizen status and established Mexico's first lithographic press. He also co-founded and edited *El Iris*, a periodical that published the first political cartoons in Mexico. Linati praised the ethnic variety of the country and the Creole role in independence. However, the most striking element in his representation of the nation was the presence of foreign volunteers. Through a number of engravings, he celebrated the contribution of Italian volunteers to the establishment of the Mexican Republic, arguing that foreign volunteers such as Count Giuseppe Stavalo and General Vicente Filisola were indeed part of the nation since they had linked its emancipation to the worldwide struggle for independence.³⁵

Other Italian exiles questioned the linguistic basis of a successful national identity, an idea then widely disseminated in Europe. In his *Dei futuri destini dell'Europa* (1828), Vitale Albera, (exiled to Geneva and Brussels after having participated in the Piedmontese revolution), claimed that in an age of proliferating exchanges between nations, language and culture were losing importance. The newly established Hispanic American republics were proof that linguistic homogeneity in a continent did not preclude the birth of separate nations, a point observed by Benedict Anderson in *Imagined Communities*.³⁶ For Albera, 'the principle of keeping one language to the exclusion of all others belongs to the time of hostility and political intolerance.' He was convinced that 'each and every national spirit stems from the people's government and from their institutions.'³⁷

The Resurgence of Anti-Hispanism

Anti-Spanish sentiment in Italy has been widely noted and examined in the Italian historiography.³⁸ Nevertheless, only in rare exceptions has the history of this sentiment been connected to changing interpretations of Latin American independence in Italy. Many Risorgimento intellectuals

would come to blame the 'Spanish occupation' or rule of Italian territories for the political, cultural, and economic decadence of the peninsula. Whereas in the early modern period the anti-Spanish attitude sought to delegitimize the Spanish power in Italy, during the nineteenth century it became a key component of the Italian nationalist imaginary. Intellectuals such as Sismondi, Botra, and Balbo joined the theme of decadence to the end of sixteenth-century 'Italian liberty,' producing a master narrative that has long underwritten Italian historiography. In the nineteenth century, anti-Spanish sentiment became not only an emotional trait of Italian identity but also a storyline that explained the Italian past as a struggle between foreign tyranny and native liberty.³⁹

The Spanish Black Legend and the so-called 'Dispute of the New World,' reconstructed by Antonelli Gerbi in his well-known work, shaped the image of independent Latin American republics as deformed by the stubborn colonial legacy of Spanish despotism. This was coupled with an earlier image of the presumed natural and physical inferiority of the American continent, established by northern European philosophers such as Buffon and De Pauw, and later transformed by Hegel into a spiritual incapacity to progress.⁴⁰ Whereas the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century anti-Spanish Black Legend was essentially linked to the Reformation, with the eighteenth-century Age of Enlightenment dispute it assumed an essentially cultural character. In the nineteenth century, it morphed into a political disability that condemned the Latin American republics to chaos and failure. This last notion also applied to the Italian south, and indeed to Spain itself. In short, the transatlantic 'colonial south' was no longer a federalist model of independence to be imitated.

Conclusion

The strong connections between the Italian and Hispanic American independence movements reveal not only the importance of transoceanic networks and exchanges but also a shared history of Spanish rule. In the early phase, the Napoleonic invasions and the Constitution of Cadiz created shared conditions that were ripe for a decolonizing or liberating federalism that might guarantee a measure of 'independence' within larger spheres of interdependence. Italian and Hispanic American exiles exchanged notes and experiences in Europe and the Americas. During the early 1820s Hispanic America became a model for Italian revolutionaries. By the 1830s, the instability of the Spanish American republics as well as Giuseppe Mazzini's hostility to federalism, eroded Italian admiration for Latin America. However, it was the advent of cultural and linguistic nationalism in the following decades that completely transformed the image of Latin America in Europe. Italian and European liberals now saw Latin America as a degenerate and passive continent, inadequate to the task of modernity, due to its Spanish colonial legacy.

Notes

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 19. See, for example, an international conference held in Genoa in 2005, *Tracce del Risorgimento italiano in America Latina*. See also: Giuseppe Garibaldi, *Liberatore globale tra Italia, Europa e America* (Ancona: Affinità Eletive, 2007); Pietro R. Fanesi, *Garibaldi nelle Americhe. L'uso politico del mito e gli italoamericani* (Rome: Gangemi, 2007).
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 28. *Ibid.*
 29. Erika Pani, 'Gentilhomme et révolutionnaire; citoyen et étranger suspect. Orazio de Attellis, marquis de Santangelo, et les républiques américaines,' in Clement Thibaud, Gabriel Entin, Alejandro Gómez, and Federica Morelli, eds., *L'Atlantique révolutionnaire. Une perspective ibéro-américaine* (Paris: Perséides, 2013), 115–130.
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